

Senator Blanche Lincoln:

Madam President, I thank all of my colleagues today. I am so pleased to come down to the floor and join my fellow Democratic women colleagues in the Senate to discuss our checklist for change.

Just so that people know, this checklist is not new. We started this several years ago. We got together and realized that all of us kept lists, like our mothers and grandmothers before us. Those checklists were helpful in accomplishing things. If there is anything we recognize from our constituents, it is that they are desperately wanting their Government to provide results, to get the results that the American people need, and they want to be able to move forward.

And so we decided at that point, several years ago, that a checklist for change would be a good thing.

So here we come back to this body, come back to our colleagues presenting, yes, another checklist for change and to say it is time to change the direction our country is going in, and here are some of the biggest priorities we face. These are age-old problems that we need new and innovative solutions to, but they are not problems we can't solve. When we come together, when we work together, we can solve these problems and bring forth for the American people what it is they are asking for, and that is results, there is no doubt.

We have heard our colleagues today touch on several issues of importance to the American people that we have listed on our checklist. I know my checklist is full of a lot of different things, as Senator Klobuchar mentioned, with the end of school coming around, but I want to take a few minutes to discuss one of the most important priorities, and one of the most important things that appears on my personal checklist most frequently, and that is health care needs. Whether it is the health care forms for my boys to go to summer camp, or making sure they get their dental checkup, or ensuring they have gotten their immunizations to be able to start school, all those things are critically important to me, and there are many health care needs our working families out there are facing as well.

It is not a secret that a health care crisis is looming on the horizon. Health care access and affordability is out of reach for way too many of our hard-working American families. When we go out to our States, at least for me, anyway, and I talk with people, one of the issues that is paramount on their minds is health care, but it is synonymous, when they speak about it, with the economy and whether they can afford it with the economy of their family budget, and what it does to the economy of their small community if health care is not available, and what it does to the economy of this country if we wait so long to provide the access to affordable health care so that people are in acute care because it is more costly. It is costing our economy more and it is lessening the quality of life of Americans who so desperately want to find that access to affordable and good health care.

As many of my colleagues are very well aware, the number of uninsured in this country stands at about 47 million. You know, we see Americans are living longer. My husband's grandmother turns 111 this year, and she still lives on her own and does amazing things. My husband and I find that we are not just the sandwich generation, but we are the club sandwich generation.

As Americans live longer, we also know, because statistics tell us, that a baby girl born in this country today has a 50-percent chance of becoming a centenarian. Moreover, as the baby boom generation begins to retire, the current Medicare system is not equipped to effectively handle the strains of such a major demographic shift. It is an issue that constantly weighs on my mind, whether it is as a caregiver for my children or for aging parents or aging grandparents, and we know it is on the minds of all working Americans out there, not just mine and not just my colleagues.

I am sure it is on the minds of many of my colleagues, because we talk about it all the time. We talk about caring for our aging parents and the needs of our kids, and it is not going away any time soon. And it is certainly not going away if we don't begin to make it a priority and do something about access to health care.

As mothers and daughters, wives, sisters, and legislators, the Democratic women of the Senate are committed to providing access to quality, affordable health care for all Americans. One way to address this issue is to put the focus first on small business owners, their employees, and self-employed individuals, who very often are those who are uninsured.

To give a snapshot, my small businesses are the No. 1 source of jobs in my home State of Arkansas. However, only 26 percent of businesses with fewer than 50 employees actually offer health insurance. Small businesses need assistance. They need innovative ways to offer affordable, accessible health care to their employees.

There is a misnomer out there that small businesses don't want to offer health insurance. They do, desperately. They know it increases their productivity, it increases their competitiveness, and their ability to attract good workers. But it has to be affordable. Small businesses have to maintain their competitive nature with big businesses and businesses all over the globe. That is why I have worked hard to design a comprehensive solution that will allow our small businesses to band together and spread their risk, much like the programs that we as Federal employees enjoy.

We also have to focus on critical reforms of Medicare if we have any hopes of ensuring our seniors, those who have built this great land we enjoy, continue to receive the essential care they need as they age. Efficiencies, quality measures, all of these issues we have talked about recently in some of our Medicare efforts and what we are trying to do in our Medicare reform bill, will lower our costs and provide greater quality, which is what we want to do. Modernizing Medicare to take advantage of those efficiencies, those new technologies--health IT, e-prescription, and a whole host of different technologies--will help us, if we make that investment, by providing the

quality as well as the efficiencies we need.

And we can't forget about the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as SCHIP. We must make it a priority to expand health care coverage to the most vulnerable of our society--our children. I hope if my colleagues don't want to do it just because they love children, which most of us do--we understand they are our greatest blessing in this whole wide world--we should do it because it is an investment in our future.

We know children who are healthier are going to go to school, they are going to learn better, they are going to turn out to be better adults, they are going to get their education, get better jobs, and pay more taxes. There will be a whole host of different things that will mean so much to this country if we provide that health care for our children.

The clock is ticking, and it is up to us in Washington to find a solution so the hard-working families of this country can be assured of a healthy tomorrow. Each year that passes without action places more and more Americans in a vulnerable position. I challenge our President and our colleagues in the Senate and on the other side of the aisle to stand with us, not against us, in providing quality and affordable health care for all Americans. Look at how much it means to this country, to those individuals, those working families who are the fabric of this country.

As the richest, most powerful country in the world, we owe it to our working families who want to protect themselves and their families from an uncertain future to provide the health care coverage they so desperately need. We owe it to the taxpayers of this country today and for generations to come to provide a quality health care system that is cost effective and sustainable. That is why I believe that providing access to good health care to America's working families is worth fighting for, and that is why it is primary on our checklist for change.

I thank the Chair.